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# Keith W. Whitelam, The Invention of Ancient Israel: the Silencing of Palestinian History

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*The Invention of Ancient Israel: the Silencing of Palestinian History*, by Keith W. Whitelam. London and New York: Routledge Press, 1996. Pp. viii + 281. \$40.00 (hardbound).<sup>1</sup>

The textbook entity “ancient Israel” is, among other things, a projection of the European nation state. Its “recovery” through archaeology and the enterprise of biblical specialists continues to function as a powerful means by which political claims to Palestine are reinforced. In this fascinating study, Whitelam boldly argues that there is a sustained interplay between the invention of ancient Israel in twentieth-century scholarship and the foundation narratives of the modern state of Israel, with the plea that Palestinian history takes its place as an autonomous discipline in the academy.

Drawing explicitly upon the thought of Edward Said, Whitelam situates the occlusion of “Palestinian history” (defined as the *histoire événementielle* of all the peoples of the region, not the received tradition of Israelites versus Canaanites and other pagan groups) within the context of European Orientalist discourse with its massive freight of nationalist destiny. Holy Land, Land of the Bible, Eretz Israel, Israel, Judah, Canaan, Cisjordan, Syro-Palestine, Palestine, and the Levant: the names of the land not only imply who controls it, but they serve to highlight and conceal access to historical information. Nineteenth-century representations of Palestine tended to depict it as a waste land, its few inhabitants morally debased

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and politically impotent, waiting for the Western powers to set its house in order, a representation echoed in supercessionist images of ancient Israel civilizing the land by ousting the Canaanites. Both biblical historians and archaeologists have promoted this view of a static and stagnant indigenous population ripe for dispossession. There is little to disagree with here. The devastating marriage of Orientalism with the brute exercise of empire by the European nations in the nineteenth century, however, should not blind us to the fact that the Orientalist impulse itself is as ancient as Greek vase-painting caricatures of Priam of Troy and the lurid literary exploits of Semiramis and Sardanapalus.

With a conscious nod to P. R. Davies' recent study, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'*, Whitelam outlines the pivotal theories of the settlement/conquest/reorganization of Palestine by "ancient Israel". A. Alt, who published a series of articles in the fateful years of 1937-1939 claiming that the Galilee (Jesus' home) became an Assyrian province in the 8th century and was free of Jews by 150 BCE, popularized his view of a peaceful Israelite immigration that swept away an indigenous population incapable of national consciousness or organization. W. F. Albright's highly influential conquest model, with its rationale of the slaughter of indigenous Palestinians as the inevitable march of history, receives extensive exposition. "Albright's description is remarkably reminiscent of the demographic distinction following the Zionist influx into Palestine with the indigenous Jewish population being assimilated ('coalesced') while the indigenous Palestine population were absorbed 'by treaty, conquest, or gradual absorption'" (p. 82). Unlike Albright, G. E. Mendenhall proposed no invasion by desert nomads, but an internal rebellion by

the disenfranchised. Ironically, even more than Albright, he stressed the inherent corruption of the regional city-state system, sharpening the distinction between Israel and the indigenous culture of Palestine. For N. K. Gottwald also, Israel's political system differs from and is fundamentally superior to that of the indigenous culture, thus perpetuating the "domain assumption" of the uniqueness of Israel at the expense of Palestine. Whitelam's political refraction of these superficially dissimilar theories yields a disturbingly consistent willingness—on the part of the leading disciplinary theoreticians—to accommodate the liquidation of the Canaanites like so many blips on a computer game. An issue that goes begging here and throughout the work is the pre-twentieth-century self-perception of the peoples of Palestine, who through most of the common era would have identified themselves as inhabitants of Syria, enrolled in the tax registers of one distant empire or the other, but who probably would have found the label "Palestinian" a puzzle.

Whitelam commences his analysis of the leading approaches to the creation of an Israelite monarchy with quotations from D. Ben-Gurion that compare the foundation of the modern state of Israel with the imagined golden age of David. "For Noth, as for most biblical scholars and certainly for the Zionist movement, there is a direct continuum between the Davidic and modern states" (p. 137). Despite the influx of fresh archaeological data from single excavation sites and regional surveys, I. Finkelstein's interpretative framework is heavily reliant upon the Bible, an observation that is elaborated in chapter 5. "The convergence of a

variety of factors . . . undermines the claim of biblical studies to have discovered a Davidic empire which was a major power in the Iron Age” (p. 174).

In chapter 5, “The Continuing Search”, Whitelam critiques the most recent uses of archaeology and biblical historiography in the quest for ancient Israel. He traces the complementary Zionist search for Israel in the invented past, in which ambiguous archaeological data are marshaled in support of political claims to the land. Whitelam correctly observes that G. W. Ahlström’s massive posthumous volume (1993), while critical of the details of other scholars’ reconstructions of Israelite origins, remains locked within the biblical narrative and the master assumption of the Israelite monarchy as defining the proper subject matter of a history of Palestine. The “minimalists” N. P. Lemche, T. L. Thompson, and P. R. Davies argue for a late dating of the biblical traditions in the Persian or Hellenistic periods, yet, Whitelam notes, the emphasis remains on the history of Israel to the exclusion of Palestine; the result is that the quest for Israel is postponed, rather than broadened to incorporate the realia of the peoples of Palestine.

The panacea to this state of conceptual hegemony lies in the creation of a “rhetoric” of Palestinian history, this to be achieved through the historians’ digestion of broad archaeological surveys of the lowlands and the coastal areas, and a methodological commitment to abandon the biblical authors’ skewed vision of the past, including “the mirage of the Davidic ‘empire’” (p. 231). Pragmatically and by disciplinary constraints, the academic locus of such an enterprise must be the secular department of history and not the divinity school or the biblical studies division, where the methodical “silencing” of Palestinian history has constituted a

reliable rung of the fame-and-tenure ladder for its practitioners. Bibliography and index appear on pp. 262-281.

This is a timely pioneering study in a minefield that will evoke applause from some quarters and, perhaps, obloquy and death-threats from others. Whitelam's polemical style and a lack of attention to the major currents in nineteenth-century biblical historiography mar the clarity of his presentation, but do not materially detract from the overwhelming cogency of his conclusions. The author is to be congratulated for producing an extremely provocative and, for the most part, faithful mirror in which the discipline of biblical studies may behold its unflattering reflection. The volume deserves a wide circulation not only among the JBL readership, but among scholars and laypersons interested in the ongoing intellectual credentials of Orientalism.

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